

Quality Education

Meeting the needs of two million students

- Where does the money go?
- The aims of our schools
- Local autonomy
- Evaluating pupil progress

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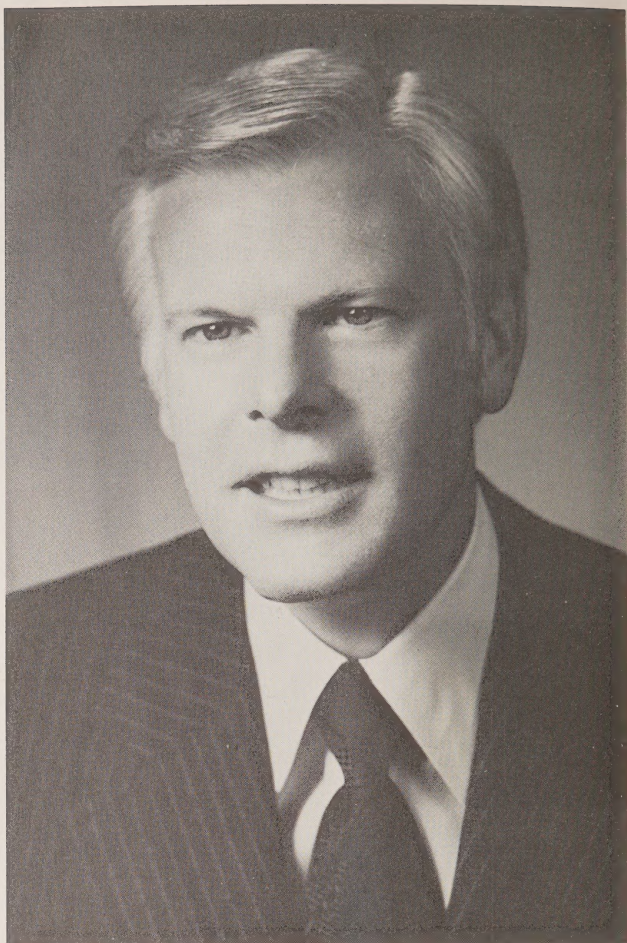
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Adapted from remarks by
Hon. Thomas L. Wells,
Minister of Education,
during presentation
of Ministry Estimates,
October 31, 1975



The Legislative Assembly of Ontario has approved the expenditure for the fiscal year 1975-76 of more than \$1.7 billion. That is a large amount of money; education in Ontario is a large and expensive enterprise.

In considering an expenditure of this size, there are two very simple bread and butter questions that arise:

—Why are we spending this much money?

—How do we know we are getting our money's worth, how do we know we are getting the quality we have a right to expect?

1 Where the money goes

In answering the first question, we have to talk about where the money goes. Basically, the budget of the Ministry of Education breaks down into three major categories:

- 1) 87.4 percent of the budget is turned over directly to local school boards in grants, to assist them in operating their schools.
- 2) 8.6 percent of the budget is for transfer and statutory payments made directly to other educational agencies and programs, such as the Teachers' Superannuation Fund, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, The Ontario Educational Communications Authority, research and other grants.
- 3) The remaining 4 percent of our budget can be categorized as direct operating expenditures, which includes not only administration and support services but also the schools operated directly by the Ministry, such as those for the blind and deaf, the Ontario Teacher Education College, and our extensive Correspondence Courses program.

The \$1.7 billion estimates for 1975-76 represent an increase of 10.1 percent over those of a year ago—and the overwhelming portion of this increase arises from increased grants to local school boards, to avoid a situation where they might have to cut back on the quality of their programs because of inflationary pressures on their budgets.

It is also worth noting that we have been able to hold our budget increase to 10 percent during a period when the inflation rate has been over 12 percent.

2 The aims of our schools

Of course, in looking at spending in education we also have to talk about the purpose or goal of education. You can go for your definition to educational philosophers from Plato and Rousseau to Dewey and Whitehead, or you can go to the man on the street. From either source, two ideas emerge:

—There is a *social* purpose to education; we educate so that people can contribute to society and can live responsibly and in harmony with others.

—There is also an *individual* purpose to education; we educate so that the individual can pursue those goals that have personal significance.

If these are our goals, then to whom should they apply?

Throughout the most of history and in most parts of the world, the answer in effect has usually been, “to a small and privileged minority.” This was once the answer in Ontario, but in recent decades we have, perhaps idealistically, but nevertheless purposefully and effectively, said, “to everyone.”

3 Equal opportunity

In doing so, we set ourselves a social challenge of immense scope and consequence. We have not yet fully met that challenge, or, in many quarters, come to realize the consequence. But we have come a long way from the stage in which we used to think that fairness and equality of opportunity demanded only that a place be found for everyone on the starting line.

There is much rhetoric surrounding the phrase “equal education opportunity for all.” In Ontario, we are taking the rhetoric seriously. We have

taken realistic and effective steps to serve a larger and larger proportion of all age groups, and we have done so through a time of unprecedented population growth. In fact, from 1965 to 1970 we were building classrooms at the rate of five a day.

But the challenge could not be met only by enlarging the system. Each increase in the percentage of the age group being served brought a proportionate increase in the range of needs to be met. To make sure that equality of opportunity was not a mockery, we had to ensure that the exceptional needs were met—we had to ensure that the variety of programs matched the variety of pupils' abilities and interests, and that the ways in which schools assisted learning matched the many different ways in which different people can learn.

And it is in pursuing the challenge of universal and genuine access to opportunity, that our costs lie. We can search for administrative efficiencies, we can bargain hard on teachers' salaries and class sizes, we can eliminate unnecessary equipment and facilities, and we are doing all these things.

But the plain reality that emerges is that the very large financial commitment which this Province makes to education has its foundation in the fact that, through the schools, we are trying to provide a genuine opportunity to all the children of the Province to develop their potential to as great a degree as possible.

The second question I would like to answer concerns the matter of quality. What are we doing to ensure that we are getting the quality to which we are entitled, to ensure that we are getting our money's worth?

4 What is "quality education?"

Quality means different things to different people. To some people, it seems to mean a highly competitive system, concentrating on a narrow range of academic subjects, graduating in the

end a small group of highly literate students who, with minimum assistance, can write an analytical essay or tackle integral calculus to the complete satisfaction of their professors.

There are a great many voices today calling for a return to this highly elitist form of education. But to me this would be a very regressive step.

In my view, quality is defined in the same terms as we define our basic goal. A quality education system is one that develops efficiently and effectively the greatest possible potential of the largest possible number of students.

It means a system where the academically talented can sharpen their intellectual wits to the highest possible standard. It also means a system in which care is taken in the beginning years to ensure that everyone acquires the basic knowledge and skills that are fundamental to everything else. It means a chance for the fast learner to gallop ahead; it also means patient help for the perceptually handicapped child who mixes up b's and d's and p's and q's, to reach a useful level of reading and writing.

A quality education system means the chance to study algebraic functions and relations, as well as the chance to catch up with mechanical arithmetic. It means that those who need to are studying basic sentence structure, while others are researching essays on the constitutional history of Canada.

Quality has as much to do with what goes on in the occupational class as with what happens in Grade 13. Quality is meeting the needs of the two million individually unique students who come every day to our schools, and meeting them well.

Quality also has to do with high standards—realistic standards that relate to individual goals. It means, if one is university bound, meeting the standards of intellectual rigour that are realistic if one is going to go to university. It means that the student in a special vocational class learning to be a service station attendant, is expected to be a first-rate service station attendant.

It means, in whatever program, for whatever student, setting a target that requires hard work and persistence to reach, but which is never out of reach. And it means the honest assessment and reporting of achievement, and levelling with parents regarding their children's progress.

5 Local autonomy

The quality of education—and the public perception of the quality of education—has a close tie with the concept of local autonomy. In Ontario, we have gone farther than probably any other Province with the concept of letting the local school boards and schools make vital curriculum and spending decisions within the framework of broad Provincial guidelines and standards laid down by the Ministry of Education.

But this policy has given rise to an odd paradox in our Province.

The idea of local autonomy is applauded by almost everyone; few people argue with the basic policy of giving individual school boards and schools the flexibility to adapt their programs to meet the specific needs of their pupils.

The paradox lies in the fact that the practical application of local autonomy has been the source, directly and indirectly, of a great deal of the public concern expressed about education over the past few years.

The reason is straightforward enough: when individual school boards or schools break with tradition in what they consider to be the best interests of their pupils, many parents cannot understand the reasons for the changes, and this leads to a feeling that standards have been lowered and that there is no central sense of direction in our school system.

Usually, such misunderstandings arise from a straight lack of communication between schools and parents—or more broadly, between the entire education community and the public.

6

Parental involvement

In fact, I am convinced that one of the biggest challenges for education today is to involve parents in the schools in meaningful ways. I say this because lack of involvement implies lack of communication. Lack of communication brings lack of knowledge, misunderstanding and mistrust.

Without good, honest communication—informing parents and others of what the schools are doing and why—local school boards and schools cannot hope to initiate changes in their programs without arousing suspicion and a sense of uneasiness among parents and the public.

However, despite the sometimes-unsettling side effects of local autonomy, the Government remains firmly committed to the idea of delegating as much decision-making authority as possible to the local level—with the rider that the Ministry of Education will continue to fulfill its responsibility in making sure that high Province-wide standards are being *set*, and that high Province-wide standards are being *met*, in the best interests of all young people in Ontario.

Let me use a few specific examples to show how this shared responsibility between the Ministry and local authorities *must* work.

7

The high school curriculum

To start with, look at the core curriculum in our high schools. We've all heard some pretty emotional rhetoric on this matter, and much of it bears little relation to what is actually happening in the schools.

To those who seem determined to perpetuate the myth that there is no core curriculum in our high schools, I can only suggest that they take an

honest look at the present practices in virtually all of our schools.

There *is* a core curriculum, and the statistics prove it. English and Canadian Studies are mandatory for every student. In grades 9 and 10, 100 percent of the pupils are taking mathematics, 89 percent are taking science, 83 percent are taking physical education.

In the upper grades, English and maths and sciences are taken by just about every student. We have documented this.

The Ministry's official policy on high school diploma requirements is laid out in a booklet commonly called H.S.1. In it, there is nothing to prevent a local school board from recommending to its students a solid core curriculum plus a good variety of meaningful and challenging options. In fact, I have been encouraging individual schools and school boards to take up this responsibility and to make sure that it is done.

We put the onus on locally-elected school trustees and their principals to develop recommended core programs for their pupils, because that is where the responsibility belongs.

In saying this, it nonetheless continues to be our policy that a student and his parents, having examined and discussed the recommended package of subjects which has been suggested by the school, can substitute one subject for another in the package.

This is allowed after consultation with the principal, in the name of flexibility and attention to individual needs and goals. If there has been any doubt about this interpretation of our policy up to now, let it be dispelled once and for all.

But there are still those who, while espousing local autonomy, at the same time talk as if they would like to go back to the days when everything in education was dictated from Queen's Park.

We don't believe in that, because it doesn't allow the schools the flexibility they need in meeting each child's individual needs. It was like that

years ago, and we all know what happened—many teenagers fell by the wayside soon after they passed the age of compulsory school attendance.

Back then, only 40 percent of our 15-to-19 year olds were in school. Today the figure is 80 percent.

8 The primary/junior curriculum

Over the past year, we have been taking decisive steps at the *elementary* school level, underlining again and again the overwhelming importance of the basic skills—the knowledge and skills upon which all later learning is based—in the early years of a child's educational experience. This is where the foundation is laid, and we have left no room for doubt in anyone's minds that the foundation must be strong.

It is well-known that we introduced this year a new Official Curriculum Policy for the Primary and Junior Divisions of Ontario elementary schools. It is called *The Formative Years*, and it strongly re-emphasizes and stresses the 3'R's—reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, grammar, and all of the other basics that are necessary to get a child off to a good start.

Inherent in the concept of local autonomy in education is the onus and responsibility of locally-elected school trustees and their educators to make positively sure that the high standards set by the Province are being met in every classroom.

In keeping with local autonomy, these are the people who must have the operational authority to ensure that the basics and a strong core curriculum are in every school, and that the programs offered are in keeping with the policies of the Ministry of Education.

9

Ministry responsibility

However, it is obvious that the Ministry has a part to play here, a greater role that has been perceived in recent years. We cannot abdicate our responsibility to monitor and evaluate current practices in education, and we have no intention of doing so.

In fact, for about 10 months, we have been quietly regenerating the regional offices of the Ministry which are located in nine cities throughout the Province. The tone of their activities is taking a turn away from what has been viewed as mainly a passive consultative role, and we are moving more in the direction of increased Ministry involvement at the local school level.

We see our regional office people fulfilling a totally vital function in sensing needs, assessing the impact of our policies, explaining those policies, and together with local school board people, ensuring that they are put into practice.

At the same time as we are moving in these directions, we are also going to look at specific steps that can be taken to improve the evaluation of pupil performance, and the reporting of each pupil's progress to parents.

We have already conducted extensive research into these matters. We have confirmed, for example, that there is indeed a great deal of standardized testing going on in Ontario schools, even though it seldom surfaces to public view.

About 80 percent of our elementary and secondary schools use these kinds of tests for diagnosis and remedial purposes, in order to help teachers identify problems and take corrective measures with individual children.

The four most-widely used tests are:

- (1) The Canadian Test of Basic Skills
- (2) The Metropolitan Achievement Tests

- (3) The Stanford Achievement Tests, and
- (4) The Sequential Tests of Educational Progress.

I mention these only to point out that such tests do indeed exist, and are being used widely in our schools. We know, in fact, that their use is increasing quite dramatically—and we encourage this most strongly—but we also believe that there is still much room for improvement in the whole area of testing, evaluation and reporting to parents.

10 Evaluation and reporting pupil progress

To start with, we believe that there is a need to take a hard look at reporting methods that are used by schools to inform parents of the progress of their children. The basic purpose of reporting is to give parents a reliable indication of how well their child is doing at school—subject by subject, and evaluating the various social and personal attributes that make for a well-adjusted, well-rounded child.

Ideally, such reporting should be an early-warning system for parents and, at the same time, a stimulus for praise, encouragement and parental guidance at home.

Today many schools do an excellent job of this. But unfortunately there are still many examples of schools leaving parents guessing as to the real meaning of report card jottings, and often parents are not alerted to trouble spots until a problem is well advanced.

There is one further aspect to this matter of reporting pupil progress to parents—and it is the very specific matter of giving parents a reliable indication of how well their child is faring in relation to other children in the same age or grade group.

11

Reporting methods

I see a valid need for an evaluation system to enable schools to tell parents that in such key areas of the curriculum as reading, mathematics and English their child is achieving at such-and-such a level in relation to Province-wide or even national norms.

I would not want to see a return to the days when pupils in each class were ranked first, second, third, and so on down to "last". The effects of this kind of pressurized comparison at the class level are far more destructive than beneficial, particularly on average or below-average pupils who are struggling to do as well as they are. However interesting such comparisons might be to parents, they can be devastating to a child's confidence and performance.

But I do think that parents deserve to know how well their child is achieving in comparison to other children measured against provincial or national norms.

12

Measuring pupils

We are going to give serious consideration, beginning immediately, to ways in which tangible improvements can be achieved in this broad area of assessing pupil progress and reporting it to parents.

We have assigned a small team of people to investigate and evaluate what is being done at present, in various areas of the Province, and to look for the best ideas and pupil-reporting techniques that can be found. We will then inform schools and school boards of our findings, and strongly suggest that they re-examine their reporting methods to ensure that parents' expectations are being met.

The key is, as I said, to make sure that schools do a first-class reporting job to parents, helping parents and the schools themselves to better evaluate each child's progress and thus to better enable them to provide encouragement and assistance to the child as required.

I have mentioned these particular activities and plans to make it clear that we are turning a critical and introspective eye on our activities, that we are not complacent about the status quo, that we are determined to continue to evaluate and improve the quality of what is being done, and that we are taking the kind of hard-nosed and practical measures that are needed to ensure that we are getting maximum value for our educational dollars.

I began these remarks by posing two questions: Why is the cost of education as great as it is, and what are we doing to ensure that we are getting the quality that should result from this expenditure?

I have, I believe, given a general answer to the first question and a more detailed answer to the second.

I have said many times that Ontario takes a back seat to no one in the high quality and standards of our school system. Those who seem bent on criticism seemingly for the sake of negativism alone, should ponder the fact that Ontario is still looked upon as a leader in education, which is the reason why the Province at any given moment is host to visitors from all over the world who have come to look at what we are doing.

Education and You

Fact Sheets

Are there some aspects of education in Ontario that you would like to have more information about?

If so, you might be interested to learn that the Ministry of Education is preparing a series of pamphlets that will either give you the information you require or direct you to the right source for information.

The following topics will be covered:

- An Introduction to Education in Ontario
- Flexibility in Ontario Secondary School Programs
- Credit for the School of Hard Knocks (Equivalency Credits for Mature Students)
- Learning at Your Own Pace by Correspondence
- Making the Most of Night School Studies
- Who's Responsible for Our Children's Education?
- Parents and Teachers: Working Together
- Education for New Canadians
- Our Schools Go Metric
- Your School Board: Get in Touch
- Reading and Writing: How Your Child Can Improve
- How Your Child Learns
- Discipline in Our Schools
- Choosing Courses in Secondary School
- Entering School: Who, Where, and How
- Career Education
- Community Use of Schools
- Education: Where Does the Money Come From?
- Education for Children With Special Needs

Additional copies of this booklet and the fact sheets are available from:

Communication Services
Ontario Ministry of Education
Mowat Block
14th Floor
Queen's Park, Toronto
Ontario, M7A 1L4

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